

ATTACHMENT A

Background on the Issue of Conservation Watersheds in Land Management Plans October 2016

Background:

There have been differences in understanding and interpretation on what is necessary or required in plan revisions under the 2012 Planning Rule with regard to Watershed Condition Framework (WCF) Priority Watersheds and Conservation Watersheds (i.e., key watersheds, critical aquatic refuges, etc.), and the differences between these separate designations. Clarity is needed on the important differences within the context of land management planning and the intent and expectations set forth in the 2012 Planning Rule.

During 2015, several inquiries were made to the Watershed, Fish, Wildlife, Air, and Rare Plants (WFWARP) and Ecosystem Management Coordination (EMC) staffs by Regions and planning units seeking clarification on incorporating Conservation Watersheds into plan revisions. This led to the development of an August 7, 2015, Draft Q&A Document entitled “Questions and Answers related to Land Management Planning Priority Watersheds” (amended and provided in Attachment B), which resulted in further discussions between the Regions and Washington Office (WO) to better understand underlying concerns and develop more unifying guidance. In October 2015, a national conference call was hosted by WO WFWARP and EMC staffs and the Regions to broaden the dialogue, explore the approach of Region 6 to address differences between their Conservation Watersheds (in this case, specifically referred to as key watersheds) and WCF Priority Watersheds during plan revision, and outline next steps to provide guidance and clarification.

Four follow-up items were identified from that call and subsequent briefings with WFWARP and EMC Directors:

1. Develop a Joint WFWARP – EMC Directors’ Letter to highlight the issue and provide guidance and clarification
2. Amend the August 7, 2015, Q&A Document to acknowledge Conservation Watersheds and distinguish them from WCF Priority Watersheds during land management planning
3. Develop Technical Guidance on Conservation Watersheds in Land Management Planning to provide the underlying scientific concepts and principles, case studies, and policy considerations involved
4. Host a series of webinars to explore and further broaden the dialogue, understanding, and engagement nationwide between FS planners, line officers, hydrologists, fisheries biologists, aquatic ecologists, watershed specialists, and others.

There is a long history of Conservation Watersheds as an important component of land management planning going back to the early 1990s with the advent of “key watersheds” under the Northwest Forest Plan. Building on the science of conservation biology and examples for Wildlife species, aquatic ecologists and planners recognized the need for identification of key watersheds as one of the elements in a broader, landscape-scale Aquatic Conservation Strategy.

Key Watersheds, as defined under the 1994 Northwest Forest Plan, provide “a system of large refugia comprising watersheds that are crucial to at-risk fish species and stocks and provide high quality water.”

Under the Northwest Forest Plan covering 15 national forests in Regions 5 and 6, this network of key watersheds was found necessary to “maintain and restore the distribution, diversity, and complexity of watershed and landscape-scale features to ensure protection of the aquatic systems to which species, populations, and communities are uniquely adapted.” The concept and need for key watersheds, or more holistically termed here as Conservation Watersheds, expanded further into the Upper Columbia River Basin through development of the PACFISH and INFISH Strategies (1995), Sierra Nevada Framework (2001 and 2004), Region 6 Aquatic and Riparian Conservation Strategy (2008), and Updated Columbia Basin Strategy (2014).

Conservation Watersheds under these various strategies and land management planning efforts are given different titles, such as critical aquatic refuges in Region 5 as part of the Sierra Nevada Framework; however, they all have commonalities, such as 1) conforming to sub-watershed boundaries and generally ranging in size from 10,000 to 40,000 acres, 2) containing threatened, endangered, or at-risk aquatic species, and 3) forming a connected network of aquatic habitats important for ensuring the long-term persistence of those species.

Conservation Watersheds are intended to maintain multi-scale connectivity for at-risk fish and aquatic species, identifying important areas needed for conservation and/or restoration, ensuring ecosystem components needed to sustain long-term persistence of species. Conservation Watersheds can be of particular importance for recovery of ESA-listed species, helping to focus and guide our overall ESA Section 7(a) 1 responsibilities.

Question and Answer:

Question 1: Does the 2012 Planning Rule allow for conservation watersheds?

Yes. The 2012 Planning Rule in 219.8 (a) (1) states “The plan must include plan components, including standards or guidelines, to maintain or restore the ecological integrity of terrestrial and aquatic ecosystems and watersheds in the plan area ...” While Conservation Watersheds are not specifically required, under Section 219.9 (b) (1), the rule states, “If the responsible official determines that the plan components required in paragraph (a) are insufficient to provide such ecological conditions, then additional, species-specific plan components, including standards or guidelines, must be included in the plan to provide such ecological conditions in the plan area.”

Furthermore, the Preamble to the 2012 Planning Rule recognizes Conservation Watersheds, called key watershed networks in the Programmatic Environmental Impact Statement (PEIS), and referred to in the Preamble as “approaches for watershed management that have been demonstrated to be effective in some parts of the country.”

Question 2: Do WCF Priority Watersheds replace Conservation Watersheds?

No. WCF Priority Watersheds can best be thought of as tactical and near-term designations guiding the implementation of agency work priorities in the near-term, whereas Conservation Watersheds are more strategic and long-term designations helping to provide conditions that maintain or restore habitat for aquatic species in highly dynamic environments over the duration of a land management plan.

For questions or additional information, please contact Dan Shively, Fisheries Program Manager, (dshively@fs.fed.us, 202-205-0951), WO-WFWARP; Mike Eberle, Surface Water Program Leader (mbeberle@fs.fed.us, 202-205-1093), WO-WFWARP; or Regis Terney, Land Management Planning Specialist, (rterney@fs.fed.us, 202-205-1552), WO-EMC.